Topic #4: Culture

- **What is culture?**
- **Culture Constrains Us and Frees Us**
- **Us vs. Them**

Topic #4: Culture

Readings for topic #4:

1. Asian-looking woman scientist image rejected for $100 bills
   by The Canadian Press
2. Body Ritual Among the Nacirema by Miner
3. The Myth of the Clash of Civilizations by Said

- **What is culture?**
- The practices, languages, beliefs, values, ideologies, and material objects that people share
- Socially produced and transmitted
    - Family, peers, school, books, sport, religion, media, etc.
- At the root of culture is solving the problem of meaning

E.g., standing in line at Tim Hortons…

- Without culture, so many of our experiences would be meaningless
- For example

Ikiwa ungeonyeshwa muktadha wa kitamaduni tofauti zaidi, unaweza kuelewa maana ya alama hizi

- Culture, then, gives our perceptions of the world meaning
- In other words, culture is a “meaning generator”
- And this is true of all our social experiences and interactions, not just language
- But these shared meanings that emerge from culture are also connected to the rules that guide our behaviours
- E.g., wearing a bathing suit has different meanings in different contexts

London 2012

Shared meanings give rise to acceptable (or unacceptable) behaviours…

…or norms

Examples?

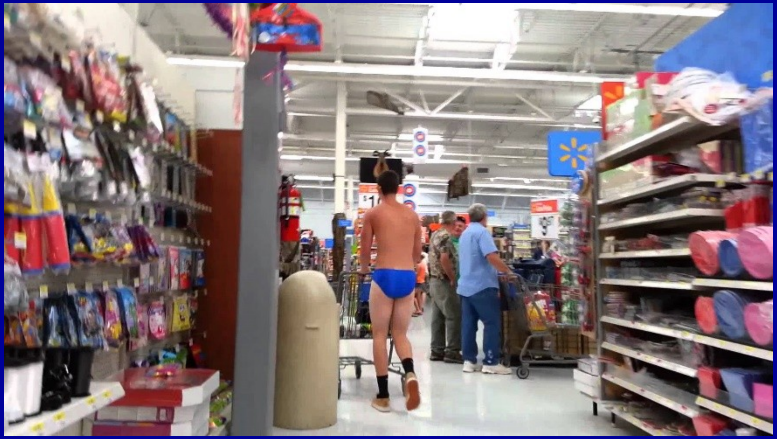
Rules, expectations, and behaviors that guide or regulate how people act within a society or group

Folkways – norms that specify social preferences

Mores – norms that specify social requirements

Taboos – the strongest and most central norms

Often transformed into laws



Example of a folkway, mores, or taboo?

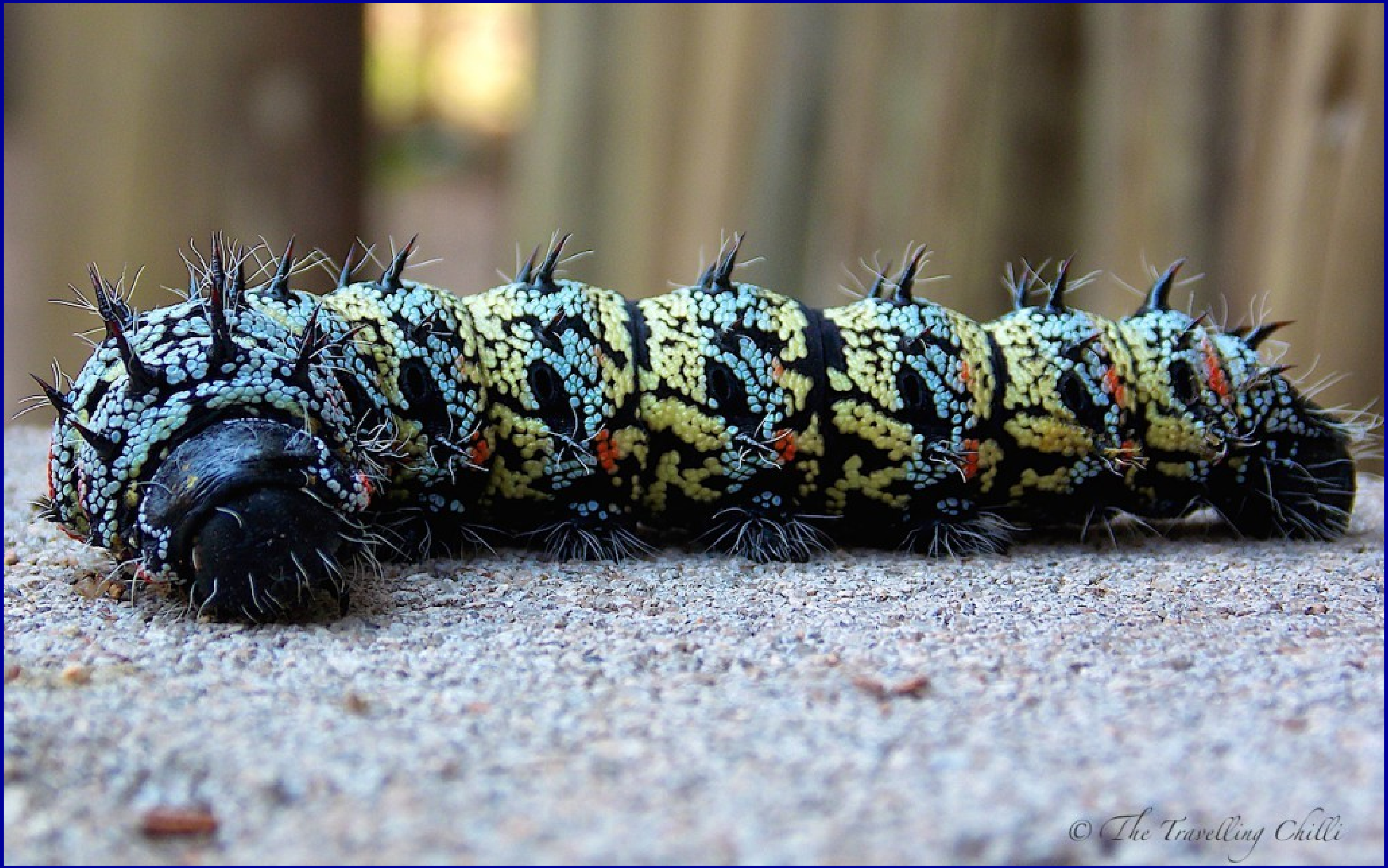
- These cultural meanings become so natural to us that we rarely stop to examine why or how we do certain things
- So we typically take our own culture for granted
  - “A fish discovers water last”

So we often see and recognize culture most clearly when we encounter practices or behaviors that differ from what we are familiar with

2003
CHAMPIONS

McDonald's
Restaurant

- These cultural meanings become so natural to us that we rarely stop to examine why or how we do certain things
- So we typically take our own culture for granted
  - “A fish discovers water last”
  - Cultural practices different than our own may be perceived as odd, or irrational, or oppressive, etc.
  - E.g., the mopane worm



Considered a true delicacy, the mopane worm is widely consumed in rural areas of southern Africa. Being highly nutritious makes it an important source of protein for a lot of households in these areas.

Source: thetravellingchilli.com

© The Travelling Chilli

The meaning attached to this worm differs depending on one's culture

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  - “A fish discovers water last”
  - Cultural practices different than our own may be perceived as odd, or irrational, or oppressive, etc.
  - E.g., the mopane worm
  - E.g., cow worship in India, especially in Hinduism

Many of us wouldn’t think twice about eating a hamburger…

trecôte de cheval
façon Tournedos

Source: Brym et al., 2016, p. 76

In contrast, many Hindus, particularly those who adhere strictly to the principles of vegetarianism, would be uncomfortable or disapproving of beef consumption

To many of us, cow worship, or eating meat from a horse, may seem odd or strange

E.g., cross your arms

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- So we typically take our own culture for granted
  - “A fish discovers water last”
  - Cultural practices different than our own may be perceived as odd, or irrational, or oppressive, etc.
  - E.g., the mopane worm
  - E.g., cow worship in India, especially in Hinduism
- An aspect of thinking sociologically is exploring the underlying reasons behind cultural practices to better understand their

Source: Brym et al., 2016, p. 76

- Cow worship makes sense in cultures where cows are heavily relied on for:
  - Dairy products
  - Tilling fields
  - Source of fertilizer
- Established its status as “caretaker”/“maternal figure”

- By approaching culture sociologically, we are typically taking a more “culturally relativistic” approach
    - Cultural relativism – understanding practices in context, and not judging them by external standards
    - Serves to promote understanding and tolerance
    - But cultural relativism in extreme instances can be controversial, especially when cultural practices may violate what most would consider universal human rights
    - E.g., baby tossing
        - A ritual practiced mainly in the town of Shahpur, India

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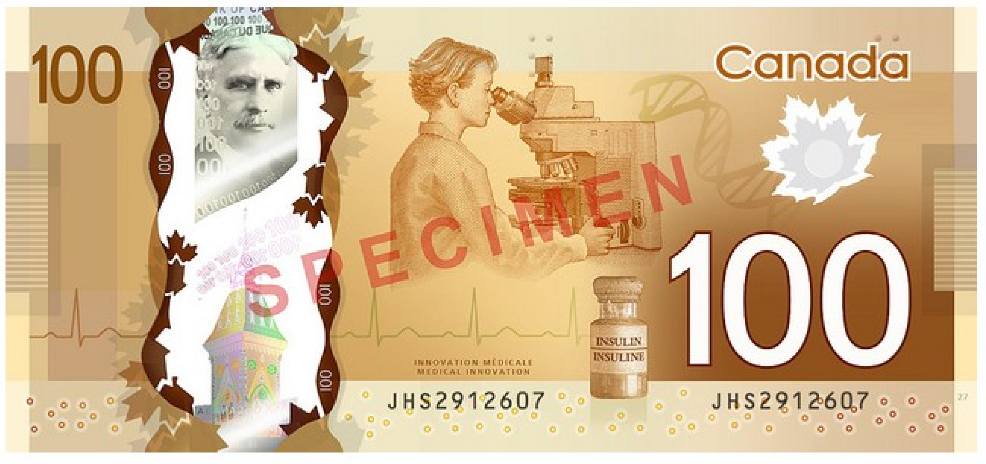
  - E.g., baby tossing
    - A ritual practiced mainly in the town of Shahpur, India
    - Not surprisingly, there have been debates as to whether this practice should continue, given the

  - A tension exists between maintaining respect for cultural diversity and critiquing practices that may be harmful or violate human rights
  - Other examples: child labour, gender-based discrimination, suppression of free speech, etc.
- If we fail to approach culture with some degree of relativity, we risk being ethnocentric
  - Ethnocentrism – judging other cultural practices by the standards of our own

- An example of ethnocentrism…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Canada
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MEDICAL INNOVATION
JHS2912607
JHS2912607

The article shows that discussions of race are fraught with complexity, emotion, and tension

- The initial version had an “Asian-looking” woman
- Concerns were raised that the note was “racialized”
- The bank ordered the image redrawn, imposing what a spokesperson called a “neutral ethnicity” for the woman scientist who, now stripped of her "Asian" features, appears on the circulating note

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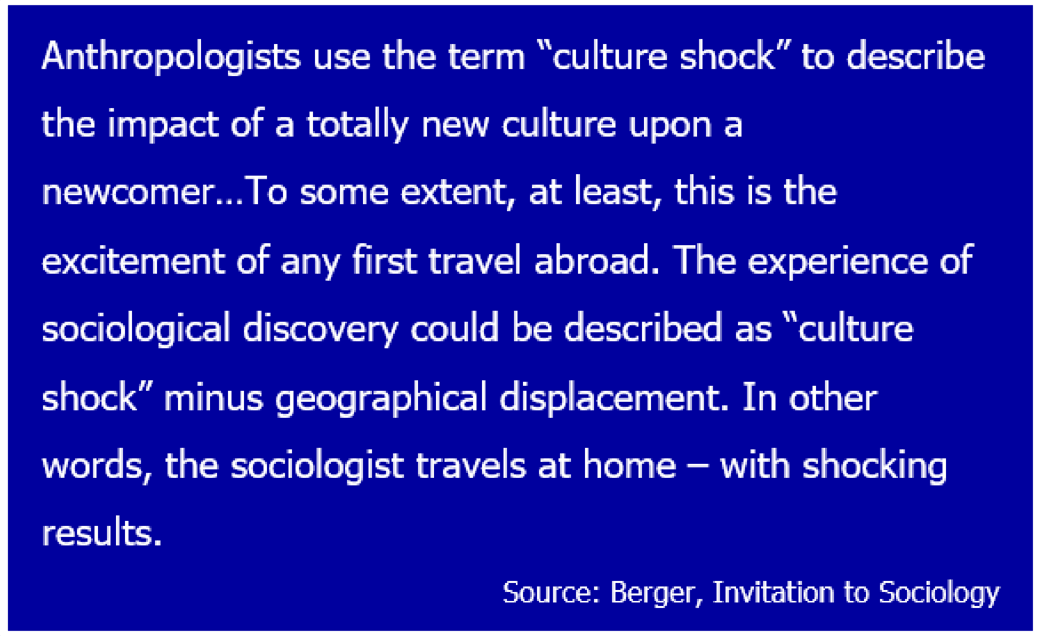
- If we fail to approach culture with some degree of relativity, we risk being ethnocentric
  - Ethnocentrism – judging other cultural practices by the standards of our own
  - We also risk being ethnocentric if we fail to see the strange, irrational, oppressive, etc. behaviours, beliefs, and ideas in our own cultural practices

“A successful sociologist makes the familiar strange.”

Conley, 2013, p. 41

We’ve seen a similar idea from a slide in the very first lecture of the course



Anthropologists use the term “culture shock” to describe the impact of a totally new culture upon a newcomer…To some extent, at least, this is the excitement of any first travel abroad. The experience of sociological discovery could be described as “culture shock” minus geographical displacement. In other words, the sociologist travels at home – with shocking results.

Source: Berger, Invitation to Sociology

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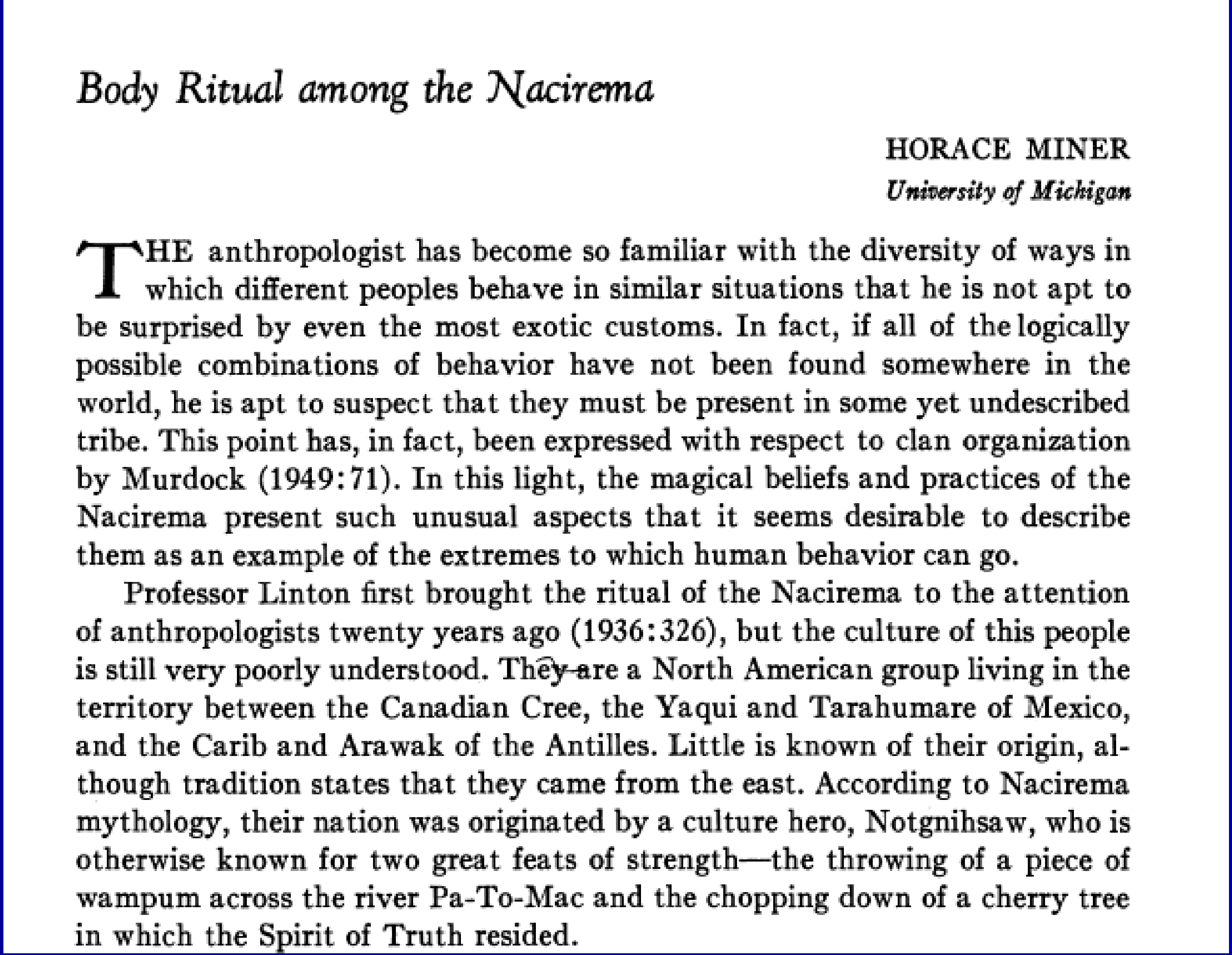
  - Examples of strange (yet familiar) practices of



Body Ritual among the Nacirema

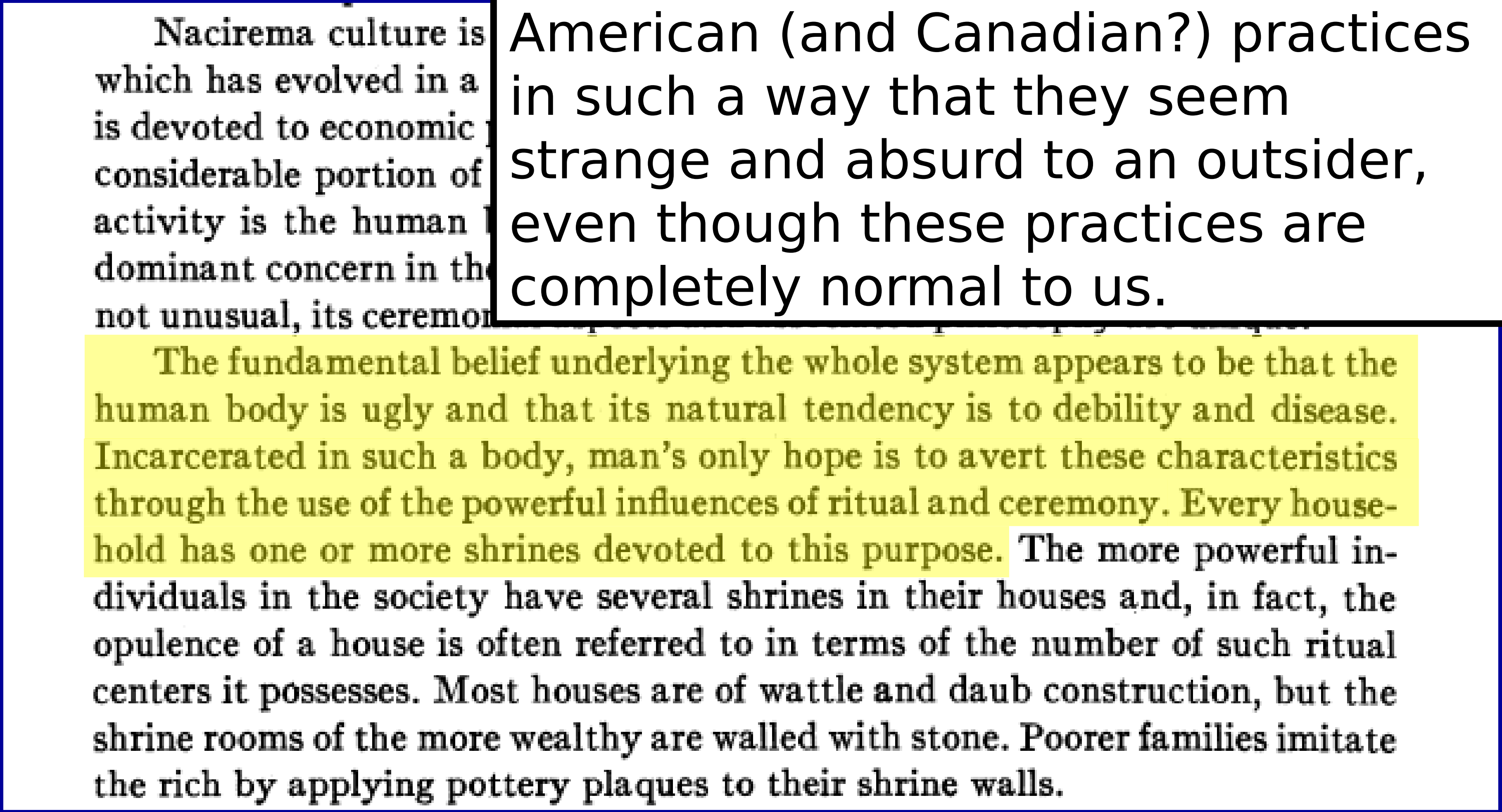
HORACE MINER
University of Michigan

THE anthropologist has become so familiar with the diversity of ways in which different peoples behave in similar situations that he is not apt to be surprised by even the most exotic customs. In fact, if all of the logically possible combinations of behavior have not been found somewhere in the world, he is apt to suspect that they must be present in some yet undescribed tribe. This point has, in fact, been expressed with respect to clan organization by Murdock (1949:71). In this light, the magical beliefs and practices of the Nacirema present such unusual aspects that it seems desirable to describe them as an example of the extremes to which human behavior can go.

Professor Linton first brought the ritual of the Nacirema to the attention of anthropologists twenty years ago (1936:326), but the culture of this people is still very poorly understood. They are a North American group living in the territory between the Canadian Cree, the Yaqui and Tarahumare of Mexico, and the Carib and Arawak of the Antilles. Little is known of their origin, although tradition states that they came from the east. According to Nacirema mythology, their nation was originated by a culture hero, Notgnihsaw, who is otherwise known for two great feats of strength—the throwing of a piece of wampum across the river Pa-To-Mac and the chopping down of a cherry tree in which the Spirit of Truth resided.

The Nacirema is a tribe, originating in the Americas, that is obsessed with cleaning themselves

Miner is describing everyday American (and Canadian?) practices in such a way that they seem strange and absurd to an outsider, even though these practices are completely normal to us.



Nacirema culture is
which has evolved in a
is devoted to economic
considerable portion of
activity is the human
dominant concern in th
not unusual, its ceremo

The fundamental belief underlying the whole system appears to be that the human body is ugly and that its natural tendency is to debility and disease. Incarcerated in such a body, man's only hope is to avert these characteristics through the use of the powerful influences of ritual and ceremony. Every household has one or more shrines devoted to this purpose. The more powerful individuals in the society have several shrines in their houses and, in fact, the opulence of a house is often referred to in terms of the number of such ritual centers it possesses. Most houses are of wattle and daub construction, but the shrine rooms of the more wealthy are walled with stone. Poorer families imitate the rich by applying pottery plaques to their shrine walls.

Nacirema?
Holy mouth men?

Shrine in every household?
Latipso?

- When one thinks about the extent to which many of us go to “present” our bodies, there is a prominent idea in dominant Western culture that the “natural” body is dirty, or smelly, or ugly…
  - And we do everything possible to “overcome” our natural bodies
  - Showering, perfumed soaps, perfumed shampoos, unscented or scented skin cream, minted toothpaste, scented deodorants/antiperspirants, make up, scented laundry detergent, cologne or perfume, shaping our bodies through exercise, plastic surgery, wearing specific types of clothing (e.g., black), etc.

- **What is culture?**
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- Socially produced and transmitted
  - Family, peers, school, books, sport, religion, media, etc.
- At the root of culture is solving the problem of meaning

E.g.: standing in line at Tim Hortons…

- Without culture, so many of our experiences would be meaningless
- For example

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A reflection of culture?

- At the root of culture is solving the problem of meaning

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Analyze the following video, and tell me what it says about the practices, languages, symbols, beliefs, values, and ideologies of North American culture

Remember, culture generates meaning…so what meanings are generated and/or reinforced in the video, and what do these meanings say about our culture?

“My Humps”

What you gon' do with all that junk?
All that junk inside your trunk?
I'm a get, get, get, get, you drunk
Get you love drunk off my hump
My hump, my hump, my hump, my hump, my hump,
My hump, my hump, my hump, my lovely little lumps…Check it out

MY LOVELY LADY LUMPS

If the media reflects our culture, what are some of the things this video says about our culture?

Would it seem “odd” if a man was singing this song?

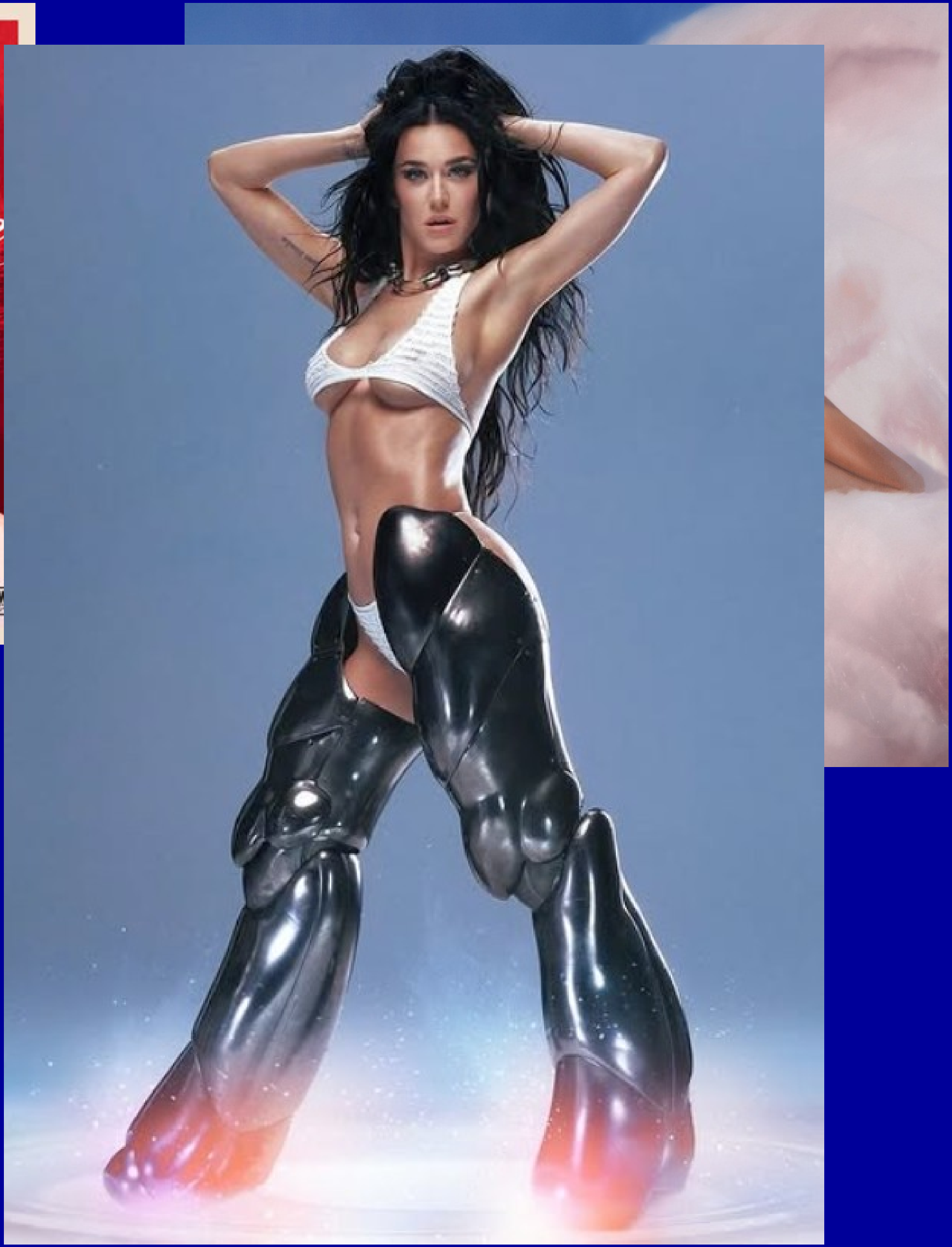
MY LOVELY MANLY BUMP??

If the media reflects our culture, what are some of the things this video says about our culture?

Would it seem “odd” if a man was singing this song?

THE GRAMMY AWARDS
VIEWIMAGES

Fergie
AS
THE DUTCHESS
STEREOPHONIC
featuring CLUMSY, GLAMOROUS, LONDON BRIDGE,
BIG GIRLS DON'T CRY, FERGALICIOUS, HERE I COME



Cover art for the song “Woman’s World”, a supposedly feminist anthem

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Examine the object of study. Consider its various properties such as: use; design; material used in its production; physical appearance; frequency of appearance; dimensions (e.g., shape, size, and weight); context of its consumption; cost; and any other aspects of the object that are of interest.

Explain what you think that this object conveys about our society. Which of our norms and values does this object articulate? What, if anything, could it tell us about the ways in which we organize our lives? In what ways does it affect human relationships? How does it challenge or confirm common-sense notions about our social and/or natural world?

www.epoll.uleth.ca!!!

- **Culture Constrains Us and Frees Us**

- **Culture Constrains Us and Frees Us**
- Culture is a paradox
- It influences both our limitations and our possibilities
  - This is similar to our structure/agency discussion from “Topic 1: What is Sociology?”
- Culture provides the external frameworks, systems, and norms (i.e., social structures) which limit our behaviours, choices, and opportunities
  - Culture dictates to us what is considered acceptable or possible within a particular society
  - E.g., the cultural norms around “appropriate”

GOLDEN GLOBES

- Cultural standards of appropriate clothing places heavy pressure on individuals to conform, especially in terms of gender
- We may not often consciously think about it, but we will feel it (often in negative ways) when we challenge constraints around clothing

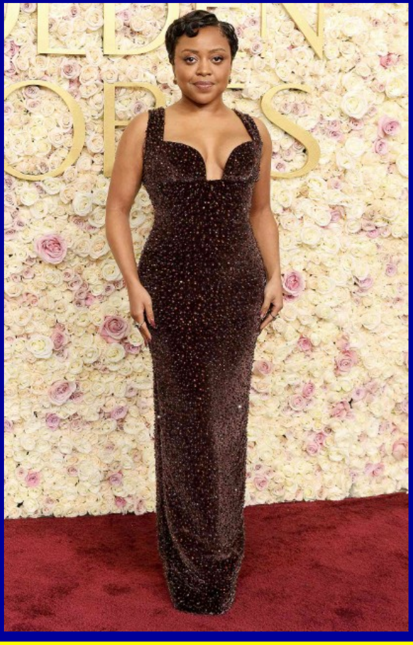
E.g., baseball cap

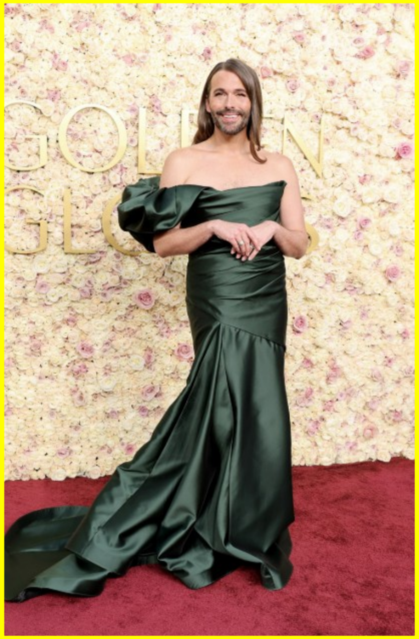
- This can lead to the restriction of self-expression

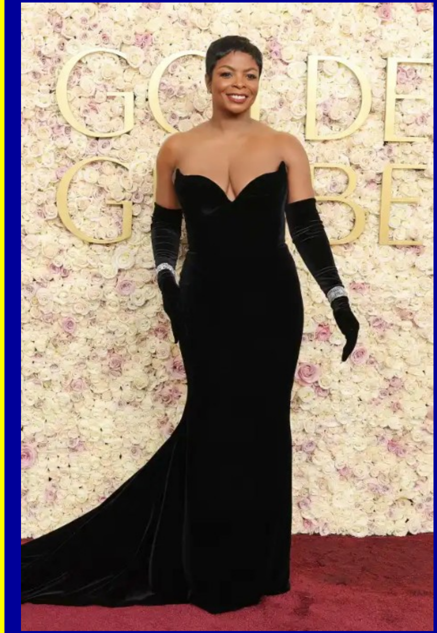
- This is just one example…the list of examples of constraints culture places on us is very long
  - Constraints around classroom behaviour, body hair, urinal use…
  - …and more broadly around gender, race, class, sexual orientation, language, age, religion, family, politics, etc.

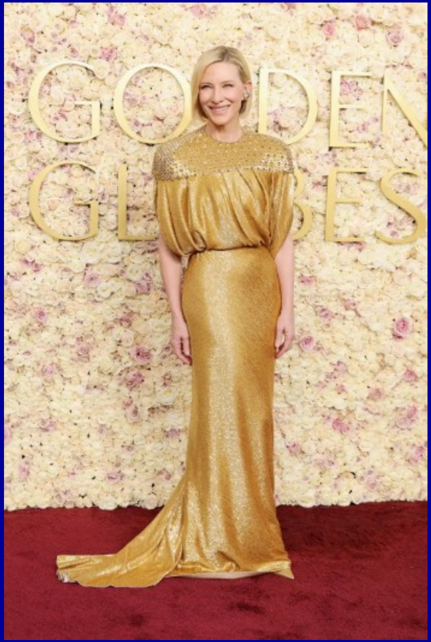
- At the same time, while culture provides a restrictive framework, it also frees us by offering the tools, language, traditions, and practices through which we can exercise our agency
  - Individuals and groups can create, challenge, reinterpret, or transform culture, thereby creating new possibilities for personal and collective expression

GOLDEN
GLOBES



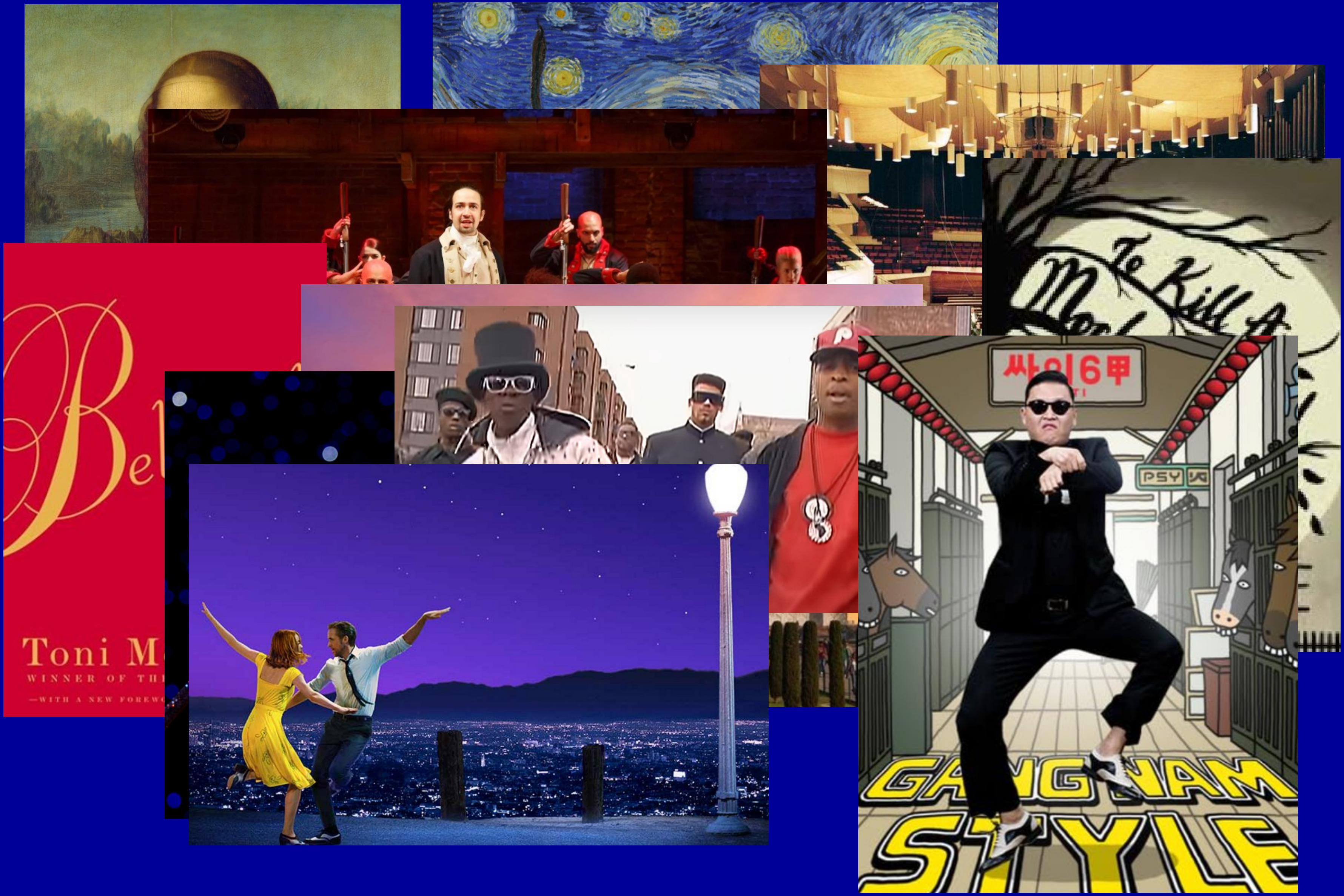






- At the same time, while culture provides a restrictive framework, it also frees us by offering the tools, language, traditions, and practices through which we can exercise our agency
  - Individuals and groups can create, challenge, reinterpret, or transform culture, thereby creating new possibilities for personal and collective expression
  - Think of great works of art, music, dance, literature, etc.

From high culture e...


Bel
Toni M
WINNER OF TH
To Kill A Mock
싸이6甲
PSY
GANGNAM
STYLE

- At the same time, while culture provides a restrictive framework, it also frees us by offering the tools, language, traditions, and practices through which we can exercise our agency
  - Individuals and groups can create, challenge, reinterpret, or transform culture, thereby creating new possibilities for personal and collective expression
  - Think of great works of art, music, dance, literature, etc.
  - Think of the importance of cultural change

#MeToo
survivors' march
ME TOO!
FREE ERIC LYLE
UNITE TO FIGHT PATRIARCHY
PEOPLE'S CONGRESS OF RESISTANCE
THE POWER STRUCTURE KEEPS WOMEN OUT OF THE NARRATIVE
FEMINISTS FIGHT FASCISM
me too

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  - Think of great works of art, music, dance, literature, etc.
  - Think of the importance of cultural change
    - A “rights revolution” that began in the 20th century
    - Historically socially excluded groups have struggled (and continue to struggle) to win equal

  - Advancement of civil rights, women’s rights, LGBTQ+ rights, Indigenous rights, disability rights, etc.
  - Democratic rights and freedoms have widened and deepened
- Think of the richness of cultural diversity, and how it offers unique and diverse ways to understand and express ourselves

MAMA LA
TACOS MADE IN MEXICO
swad
The Taste Of South India
HONG KONG GARDE
PICKUP and DELIVERY
HONG KONG GARDENS
485-13 Street North
NKKi
N STREET FOOD
OPEN
VIA CIBO
ITALIAN STREET FO
LUNCH SPECIAL

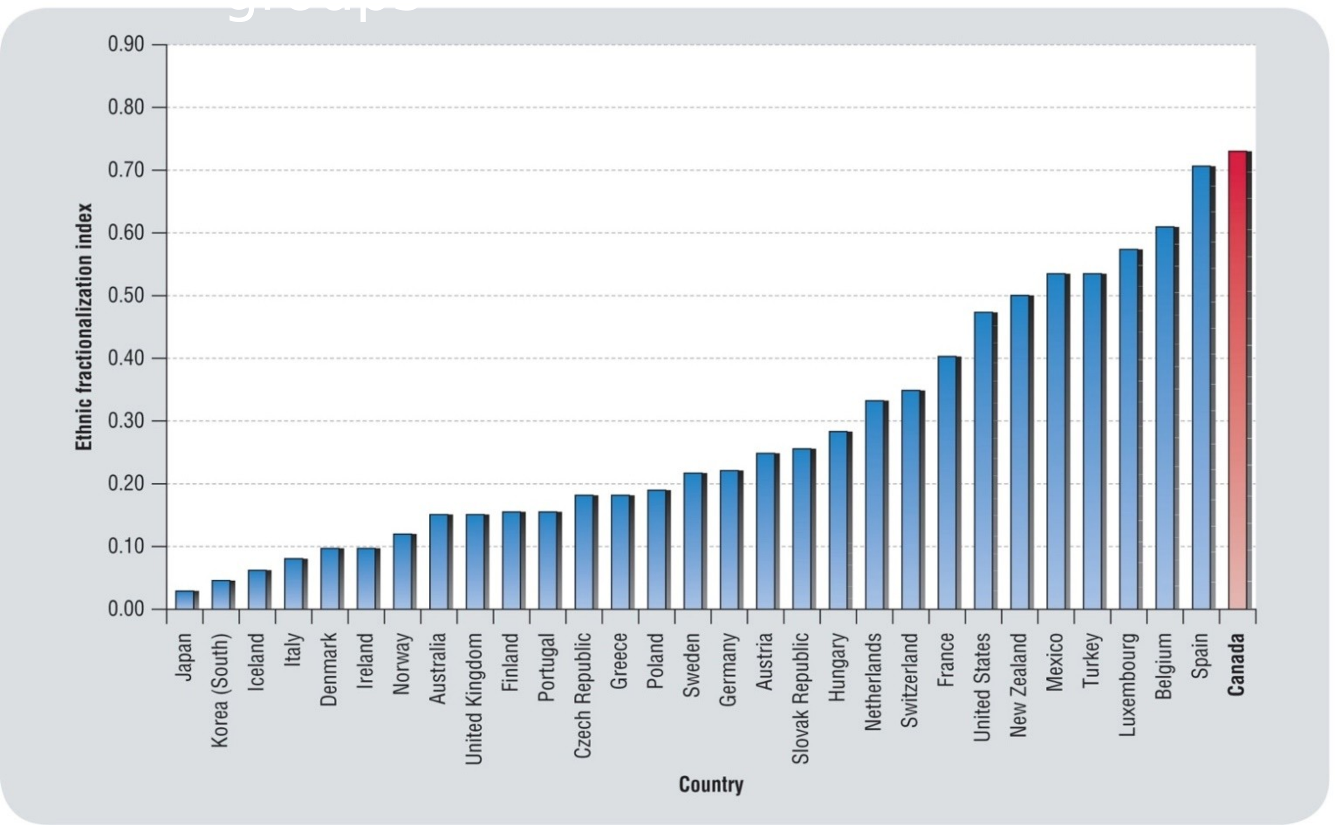
  - Advancement of civil rights, women’s rights, LGBTQ+ rights, Indigenous rights, disability rights, etc.
  - Democratic rights and freedoms have widened and deepened
- Think of the richness of cultural diversity, and how it offers unique and diverse ways to understand and express ourselves
  - Canada is relatively unique in this respect

“Canadians know that we’re stronger not in spite of our diversity, but because of it. That’s why, in 1988, we adopted the *Canadian Multiculturalism Act*, making Canada the first country to recognize multiculturalism as an official policy.”

Statement from former Prime Minister Justin Trudeau on Canadian Multicultural Day, Jun. 27, 2024

Ethnic fractionalization in 30 OECD countries

Probability that two randomly selected people from a population will be from different ethnic groups

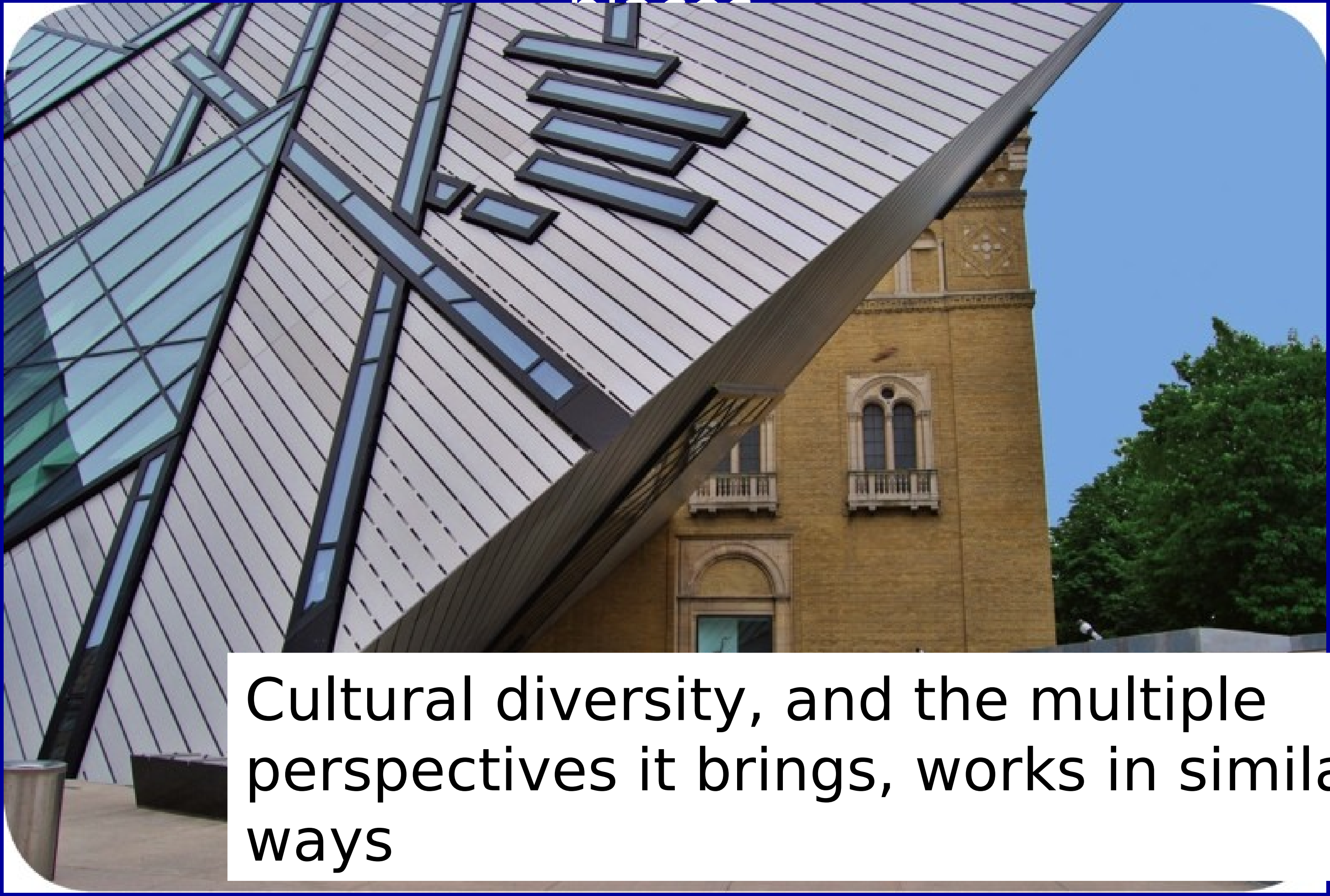


Source: Patsiurko, et al. 2012. p. 206

  - Advancement of civil rights, women’s rights, LGBTQ+ rights, Indigenous rights, disability rights, etc.
  - Democratic rights and freedoms have widened and deepened
- Think of the richness of cultural diversity, and how it offers unique and diverse ways to understand and express ourselves
  - Canada is relatively unique in this respect
  - Can lead to tension and conflict, but can also lead to a tolerance, cooperation, innovation, creation, etc.

- Some scholars have argued that much of this cultural fractionalization and reconfiguration that has taken place in the past few decades requires a term to characterize these changes…
  - …postmodernism
  - Exited the era of modernity
    - Began around the time of the scientific revolution (approx. 1700s)
    - Through science and rational thought, objective or single truths about reality can be discovered
  - PM – characterized by the belief that knowledge and understanding varies by time, place, and circumstance…

A hallmark of postmodernism is the combining of cultural elements from different times and places



Cultural diversity, and the multiple perspectives it brings, works in similar ways

Source: Brym et al., 5th ed., 2016, p. 85

- Some scholars have argued that much of this cultural fractionalization and reconfiguration that has taken place in the past few decades requires a term to characterize these changes…
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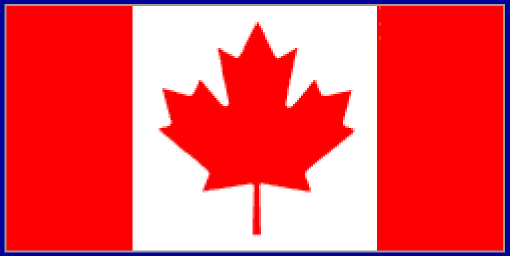
For example…

Freedom

Peacekeeping

The North

Hockey



Racism

Colonialism

Ethnocide

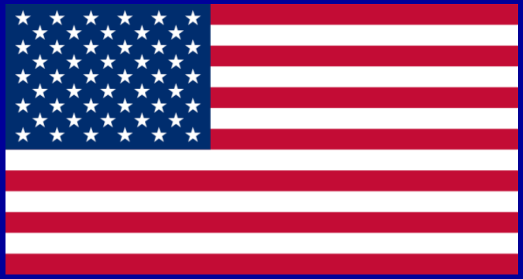
Genocide

Democracy

Capitalism

Strength

Pride



Imperialist

War

Individualistic

Greed

Another example: what is good music?

- **Us vs. Them**
- A final word about culture…
  - …and the language of cultural identity
- Remember, culture refers to the practices, languages, beliefs, values, ideologies, and material objects that people share
  - We could add to this definition: It is a lived experience, but also a social construct, evolving over time and across generations
  - It’s fluid and does not stay stagnant
- And yet we sometimes we simplify culture into something that is monolithic and homogeneous

A commercial advertising Molson Canadian beer…that speaks about “Canadianess” or “Canadian culture”

As you watch, note the use “we”, “our”, and

- A common rhetorical tool, especially among politicians

“Across the country, Canadians stand united in our grief, and today we join together in remembrance… And right now, to all Canadians, it feels like we knew the people we just lost…In times like this, we remember that that same sense of community that’s felt in towns like Portapique, Wentworth, Milford, and Enfield is what makes us Canadians. We remember why we’re there for each other, and why we look out for one other, because that’s who we are…As Canadians, we’ll always stand together. Today, tomorrow, and everyday.”

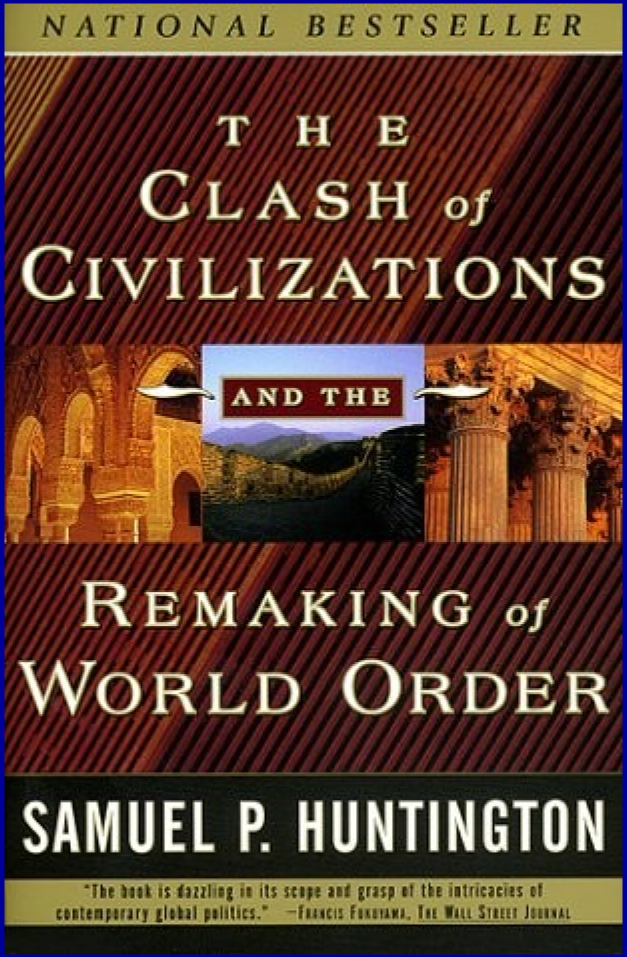
Justin Trudeau, in response to the mass shooting in Nova Scotia in 2020

“We are one people, one family, and one glorious nation under God.”

Donald Trump, 2018, referring to Americans

- A common rhetorical tool, especially among politicians
  - Attempts to unite and inspire us to collectively accomplish positive things, so this isn’t necessarily wrong
  - Gives us a sense of identity and helps us connect with people who share similar experiences
  - Edward Said (in the assigned reading) calls this the “official culture”, which is largely propagated by the state
- But there are also dangers to constructing the idea of a homogenous cultural identity

- When we ignore the fluidity and plurality of culture, we risk creating an “us” and “them” binary
  - We are engaging in the process of “othering”
  - Creates the conditions for dehumanizing, stereotyping, positioning as inferior or threatening, those who are different from “us”



NATIONAL BESTSELLER

THE CLASH of CIVILIZATIONS AND THE REMAKING of WORLD ORDER

SAMUEL P. HUNTINGTON

"The book is dazzling in its scope and grasp of the intricacies of contemporary global politics." —Francis Fukuyama, The Wall Street Journal

- In the assigned reading, Said is responding to a book by Huntington
- Capitalism vs. communism
- This was a political and economic conflict
- Huntington argued that future conflicts will be between cultures, not countries
- The West vs. Islam

Note the simplified binary Huntington is using

- When we ignore the fluidity and plurality of culture, we risk creating an “us” and “them” binary
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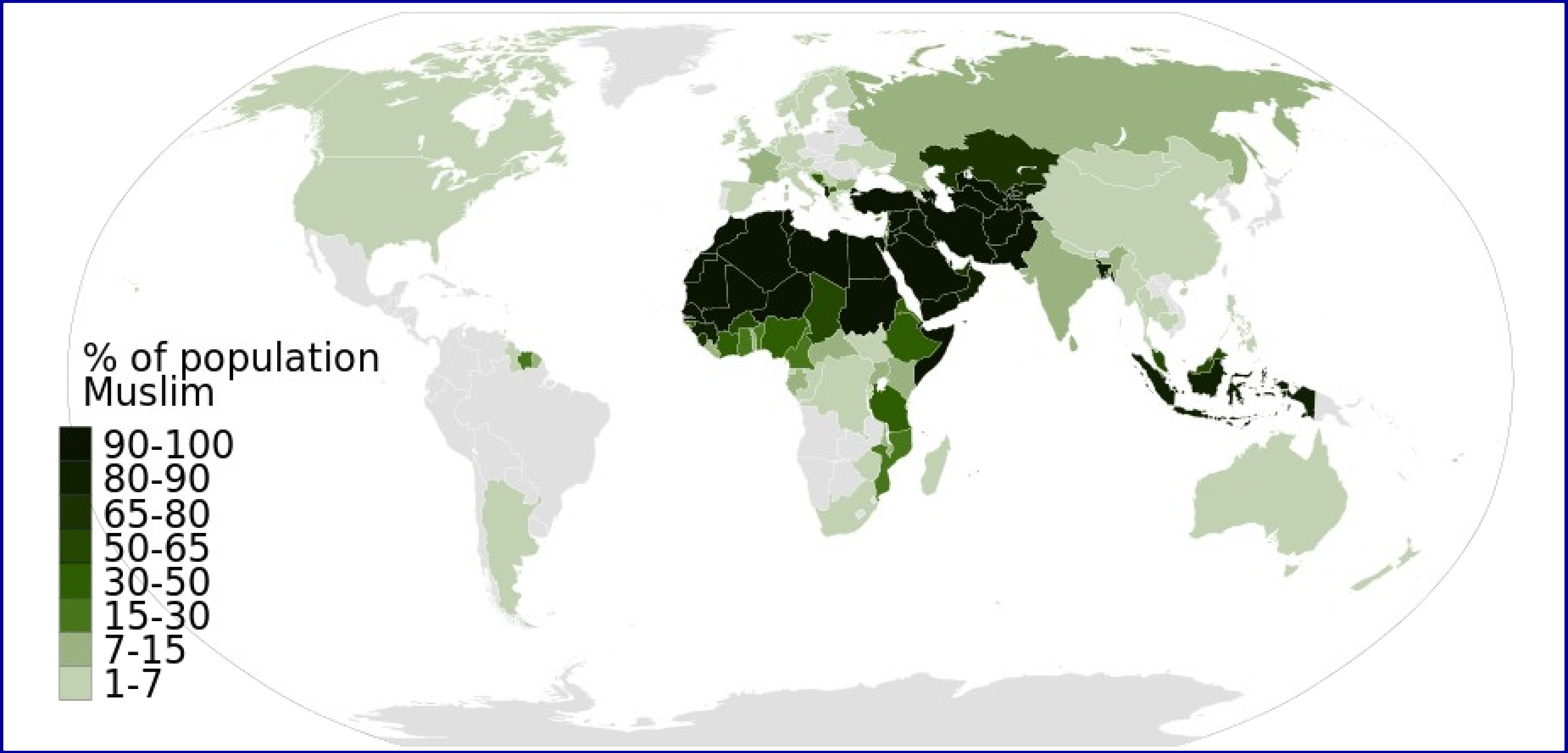
- Huntington’s proposition ignores that vast diversity that exists in the Islamic world


% of population Muslim
90-100
80-90
65-80
50-65
30-50
15-30
7-15
1-7

≈1.9 billion Muslims

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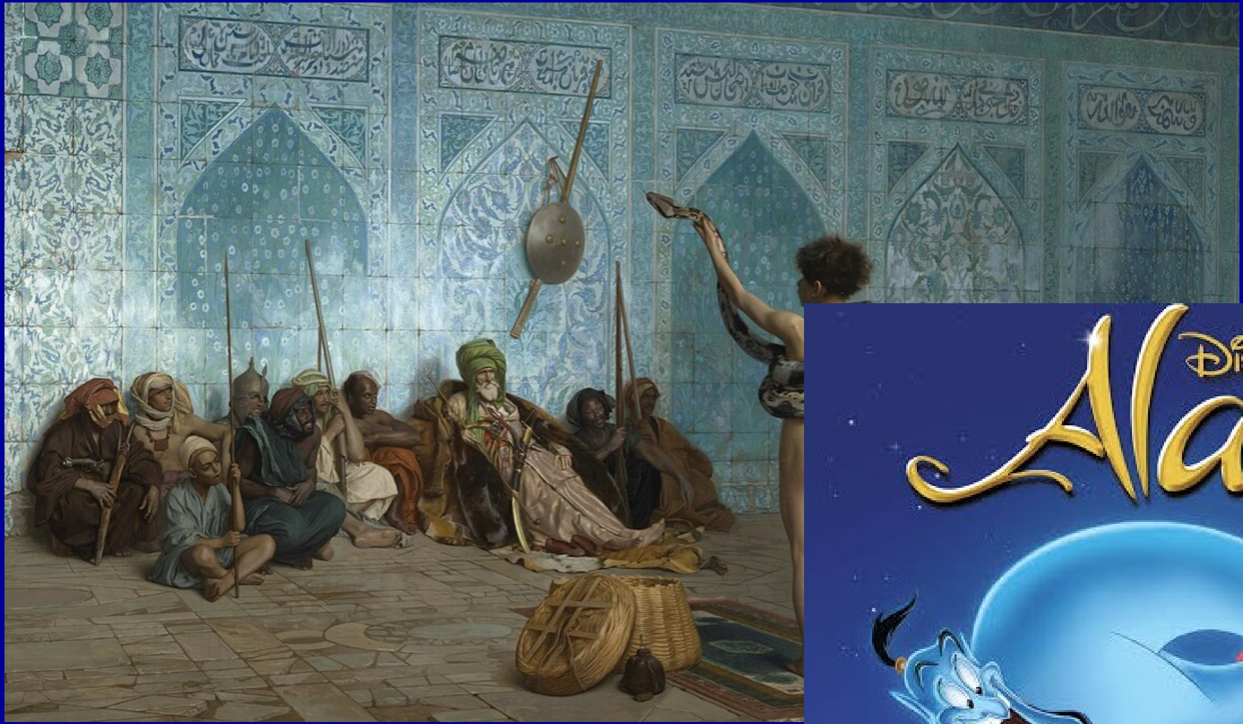
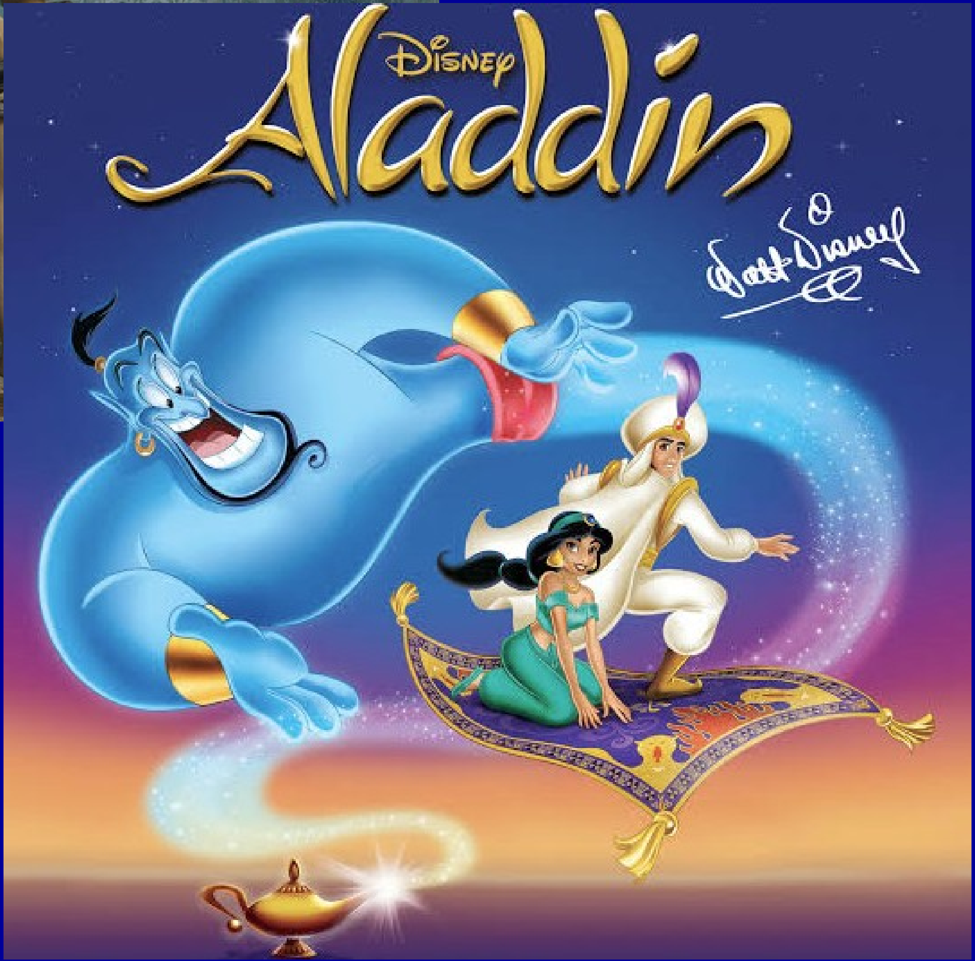
    - We are engaging in the process of “othering”
    - Creates the conditions for dehumanizing, stereotyping, positioning as inferior or threatening, those who are different from “us”
- Huntington’s proposition ignores that vast diversity that exists in the Islamic world
    - Huntington’s ideas are contributing to a process that Said has referred to as “Orientalism”
    - The ways that “Orient” (Asia, the Middle East, North Africa) has been and continues to be constructed in the western European and North

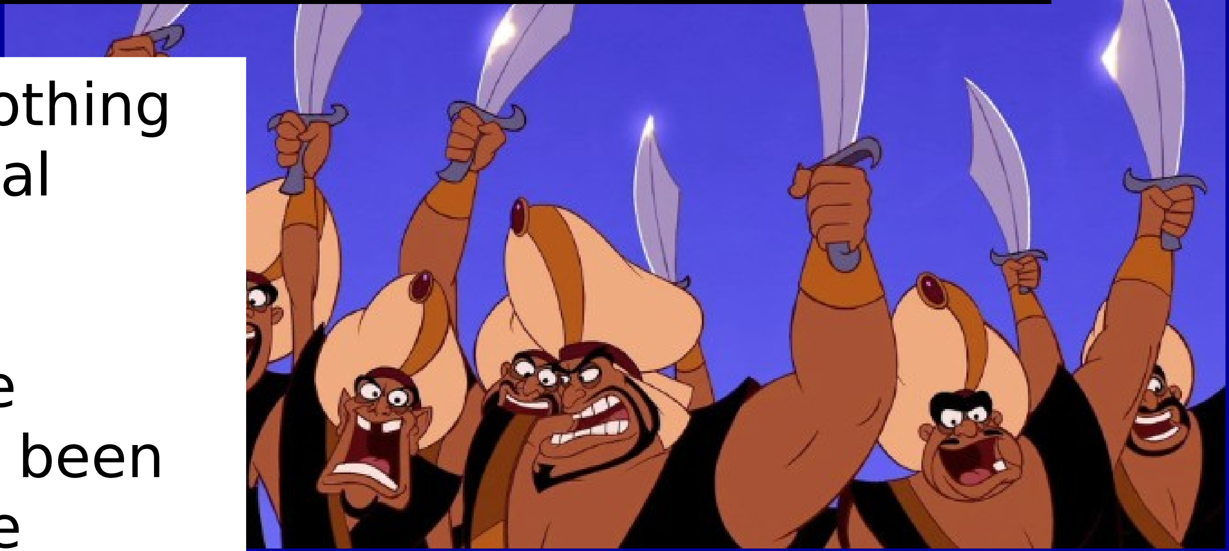
- Imagined as mystical, exotic, and mysterious…




Disney
Aladdin
Walt Disney

Said, who was born in Mandatory Palestine in 1935, would see these kinds of images and read Western discourse about the East and think: that is nothing like my experience!

- Imagined as mystical, exotic, and mysterious…
- …and primitive, barbaric, and violent



Again, this was nothing like Said’s personal experiences

Instead, these are images that have been constructed in the Western imagination

  - Imagined as ancient, exotic, and mysterious…
  - …but also primitive, barbaric, and violent
- And Huntington also ignores the vast diversity that exists in the Western world
  - Do Canadians hold the same values as Americans?
- Huntington also ignores the overlapping values, beliefs, experiences, etc. between these supposedly binary cultures
- Creating these kinds of binaries is a prescription for conflict
  - There are many historical examples of this!!